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ABSTRACT

This digest addresses one of the most recognized, yet unofficial, special populations on college campuses nationwide-- college student athletes. It is proposed that misconceptions and stereotypical viewpoints have hindered the development of effective counseling interventions with this population. Although college counseling centers are available, student athletes have traditionally chosen to seek help from other sources such as coaches, teammates, family and friends. This digest seeks to help college counselors become aware of the many barriers that influence a student athlete's decision to seek help outside of the counseling center. These barriers include both internal and external barriers, such as a "win-at-all-costs" philosophy, social stigma, barriers from the athletic department, and team commitments. It is hoped that creative counselors will find ways to overcome barriers mentioned in this digest, making counseling a more attractive alternative to many student athletes. (Contains 14 references.) (GCP)

Overcoming the Challenges of Counseling College Student Athletes

ERIC/CASS Digest
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Joshua C. Watson

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Introduction

College student athletes have long been the most recognized, yet unofficial, special population on college campuses nationwide (Valentine & Taub, 1999). Misconceptions and stereotypical viewpoints have hindered the development of effective counseling interventions with this population. Oftentimes, student athletes are seen as performers who are placed in public arenas to have their successes praised and their failures criticized (Valentine & Taub, 1999). Ferrante, Etzel, and Lantz (1996) noted that the general view of college athletes is that they are overprivileged, pampered, lazy, out-of-control, and primarily motivated to attend school for the sole purpose of participating in intercollegiate athletics. These misconceptions cloud the fact that student athletes are individuals with problems like everyone else, yet they are not receiving the potential benefits of counseling services. Recent findings have shown that this is more of an issue than originally estimated (Maniar, Curry, Sommers-Flanagan, & Walsh, 2001). In fact, researchers have shown that student athletes are not only hesitant to seek help from a counselor, but they are also reluctant to take advantage of sport psychology services (Brewer, Van Raalte, Petipas, Bachman, & Weinhold, 1998).

Statement of the Problem

Researchers have suggested that 10-15 percent of American college student athletes are dealing with issues significant enough to warrant the need for professional counseling services (Ferrante, et al., 1996; Parham, 1993). Current National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) statistics approximate that over 361,000 student athletes are participating in collegiate sports. Therefore, approximately 35,000-50,000 student athletes are facing troubling issues in their lives that might warrant counseling assistance. Many of these issues are no different than those faced by other college students. Student athletes attend college with the same academic, emotional, and personal goals and concerns as other college students (Ferrante, et al., 1996). One noticeable difference, however, is that college athletes also cope with additional influences that impact their cognitive, social, moral, educational, and psychosocial development.

Although college counseling centers are available, student athletes have traditionally chosen to seek help from other sources such as coaches, teammates, family, and friends (Selby, Weinstein, & Bird, 1990). College counselors need to become aware of the many barriers that influence a student athlete's decision to seek help outside of the counseling center. Knowledge of these barriers can help counselors better serve this population.

Barriers Toward Seeking Counseling Services

Barriers toward seeking counseling can be either internal (personal attributes) or external (situational pressure) in nature.

Internal Barriers

Traditionally student athletes have been raised in an environment that stresses the importance of resiliency and self-reliance (Etzel, Ferrante & Pinkney, 1991). The good of the team or the overall athletic performance takes precedence over personal problems (Etzel, 1989). This mentality may lead to the onset of barriers to help-seeking behavior. These barriers include a win-at-all-costs philosophy and the social stigma associated with seeking help.

Win-at-all-costs philosophy. Many student athletes have functioned throughout their athletic careers under the assumption that winning and peak performance are the ultimate goals of athletic competition. Student athletes are rewarded for their accomplishments on the playing field. Admitting personal needs or issues could conceivably damage their chances to succeed by weakening

their self-efficacy in their ability to perform, damaging the level of trust established with their teammates, reducing playing time, or weakening their coach's confidence in their ability to perform (Etzel, Pinkney & Hinkle, 1994).

Social Stigma. For most students, seeking help is largely an anonymous act. This is not so, however, for the highly recognized student athlete (Etzel et al., 1991). Many college student athletes enjoy a sense of "celebrity status" on campus and may not want to be seen at a counseling center for fear it may jeopardize their image as "heroes" by revealing a perceived need for help (Etzel et al., 1991). In a study of students' attitudes and expectations about sport psychology (Linder, Pillow & Reno, 1989), male and female undergraduate students rated case study athletes lower in terms of prestige if they were said to be seeking counseling services. Therefore, student athletes may rationalize that potential benefits of seeking help are less than negative consequences of a tarnished image and, subsequently, do not seek counseling services.

External Barriers

Forces beyond the control of student athletes also may contribute to the underutilization of counseling services. External barriers to counseling services come from the athletic department and its personnel, university administration, and from team commitments.

Barriers from the athletic department. Intercollegiate athletics have been described as a closed system within the institution of the university (Ferrante et al., 1996). Many athletic departments see themselves as independent entities, separate from the rest of the university. Some maintain that athletic departments, especially well-known departments, are in fact independent on-campus businesses that have little or no connection to other functional activities of their school. Such an independent view can be adopted by student athletes and may inadvertently lead them to ignore available campus services and look instead to athletic staff and teammates for needed support (Ferrante et al., 1996).

Those who work with student athletes may not be appropriately trained to handle normal developmental issues. Many of the individuals assigned to help student athletes come from physical education, education, sports medicine, or business backgrounds (Etzel et al., 1994). They do not have the counseling or psychological training necessary to help student athletes with personal, social, and educational concerns. Brooks, Etzel, and Ostrow (1987) found that the majority of professionals who work with student athletes were former college student athletes whose sole responsibilities were to maintain academic eligibility and enhance sport performance. As a result, student athletes may not be aware of the range of services available across campus.

Barriers from the university. Barriers at the institutional level may inhibit the help-seeking behavior of student athletes. Institutions may assume a cautious role and choose not to offer additional support services to their student athletes for fear of violating NCAA sanctions. The perception of student athletes as an overprivileged minority has many institutions cautious that they not be viewed as providing too many benefits to student athletes. Universities frequently act under the assumption that the individual athletic programs will handle issues and concerns of athletes.

Additionally, if an athletic program is successful, the university may be hesitant to deal with student athletes' problems, assuming that interventions will only serve to create adverse reactions from students, alumni, and fans. Supporters of the program may choose to ignore problems when the team is winning. Any programming additions may

be construed as disturbing the "winning formula" already in place. If the program is unsuccessful, university personnel might try to distance themselves from the negative situation, fearful that any negative publicity placed on the athletic program would carry over to the university at large (Etzel et al., 1994). Both circumstances create situations where student athletes are unable to obtain the services they may need.

Team commitments. Practice and competition drastically reduce the amount of free time the student athlete has available for accessing needed services (Etzel et al., 1991). NCAA regulations allow up to 20 hours per week for activities associated with participation in an intercollegiate sport. This is on top of the demands academic schedules place on the student. Student athletes are unable to sacrifice athletic or academic time to seek help for personal problems and often, by default, turn to their coaches and teammates for the help and support they need.

Implications for Counselors

In dealing with college student athletes, it is often necessary for the counseling professional to be proactive. A working knowledge of barriers that might factor into a student athletes' decision to seek counseling can help counselors better respond to the unique challenges and concerns of this population.

Counselors can help student athletes overcome internal barriers to seeking help by promoting the connection between mental and physical health. Individuals who enjoy optimal mental health will be able to perform better by being able to manage stress and concentrate more on their performance (Vandervoot & Skorikov, 2002). Counselors can also conduct sessions in or near athletic facilities where student athletes can access services privately. They may also work with teams directly by attending practices or designated team meetings.

Examples of how counselors can overcome internal barriers to student athletes' seeking help include gaining knowledge of the collegiate athletic structure and adding clinic hours to accommodate student athletes' schedules. By learning the culture of collegiate athletics, counselors can better understand the demands placed on student athletes, thus gaining their trust and acceptance (Broughton, 2001).

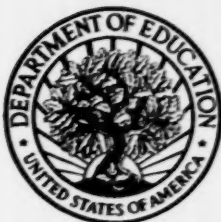
Because many student athletes are reluctant to use a student mental health service and seeking help is contrary to their perception of themselves as independent and self-reliant, there may be an increased risk of premature termination (Pinkerton, et al., 1989). The counselor should be sure to focus on several areas key to successful therapy: 1) establishing rapport with the student athlete helps develop a sense of team that translates well into their everyday lives, 2) encouraging students to share their problems and openly engage in session should be an early goal, and 3) stressing confidentiality due to the factors previously mentioned. Creative counselors will find ways to overcome the barriers mentioned in this digest, making counseling a more attractive alternative to many student athletes.

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